

# **The Psychological Anatomy of Gossip**

**Sandy Valmores Chua  
University of San Jose Recoletos**

**Kristine June de la Cerna Uy  
University of San Jose-Recoletos**

*Gossip's unrelenting presence throughout time, age, gender, and social structure has sparked a lot of questions regarding its occurrence. Although studies have already been made regarding gossip, it has remained to be an understudied happening in the area of psychological research. This paper examines gossip from a psychological standpoint, looking into the relationship between a person's self-concept and their propensity to gossip. The theory formulated in this study will explain, describe, and predict the nature of gossip as a projection of basic life issues. This paper gives another perspective into how gossip can be viewed, examined, and understood.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gossip is a phenomenon that has been labeled by many as bad. Whenever someone brings up the word gossip, people most certainly would conjure images of wagging tongues and loose lips, of vicious gossipers and poor helpless targets. Common perception of gossip places it on the negative, as evidenced by the terms "small talk", "shop talk", "idle talk", and "backstabbing". Stereotyped as malicious and hurtful, it has been widely blamed for damaged reputations, relationships gone sour, and battered morale. History shows that gossiping has been gleaned as a destructive and deplorable act, one that warrants punishment and a warning to be watchful against. Gossip is a form of reputational warfare and, in the organizational workplace, has been linked to reasons behind employee resignations, ineffective leaderships, and an atmosphere of animosity (Hallet, 2009). Ironically, despite gossip's negative reputation, it remains to be ubiquitous. Practically everybody has participated in gossip, and sometimes it is unavoidable for one to be part of a gossip episode. Its continued existence amidst such a negative reputation has only added to its mystery, and has led to various studies. The meaning of gossip has undergone a lot of changes. Studies have been made to give room for a more neutral definition, recognizing that gossip can surprisingly be both positive and negative. Consequently, its effects could also be either good or bad. This paper attempts to develop a theory on the reason behind the omnipresence of gossip, what truly motivates it, and what keeps it alive.

Empirical research has not construed a definite stand as to the extent of gossip's influence in human lives. Depending upon one's point of view, the wide-ranging rubric of gossip can have positive or negative social effects. This study takes into account the definition of gossip by Foster (2004) as an exchange of personal information about an absent third party that is conveyed in an evaluative manner. Three elements for information are identified to be labeled as gossip. First, it must be personal in nature,

bearing with it a sense of intimacy shared upon by people with common interests. Secondly, gossip is about an absent third person. It comes in a veil of secrecy thus, making it imperative that for gossip to occur the target of the gossip must not be around to confirm, deny, or defend his side of the tale. Finally, gossip must be conveyed in an evaluative manner. When a gossiper passes on gossip, he is also impliedly passing on his personal judgment (i.e. evaluation) on the matter, be it positive or negative. Consistent to gossip's evaluative nature, Turcotte (2012) held that for one to be less likely gossiped on, one must then adhere to group norms. Typically, one who violates a norm becomes the subject for gossip. Wilson et al. (2000) maintained that in upholding group norms, gossip becomes self-serving, of which the gossipers are reflected on the better side, and targets are pulled harshly. People generally do not want to be labeled or tagged as a gossiper, thus according to Blumberg (1972), the inclination to gossip is essentially a violation of one's right to privacy.

When men get talked about, it is almost always about something remarkable or detestable, thus bringing them either praise or blame (Machiavelli, 1516/1995). This gives light to both the positive and negative bearing of gossip. Mettetal (1982) observed that, among adolescents, exchanges were likely to be more negative. This may suggest that the more mature a person becomes, the more subtle and complex the transmission of gossip becomes (Gottman&Mettetal, 1986). Leaper and Holliday (1995), on one hand, found that for both positive and negative kind of gossip, gender differences take weight.

A small, albeit important, portion of every day conversation time is consumed by malicious gossip (Dunbar, 1997). Ayim (1994) depicted that the veracity to gossip is established upon the gossiper's intent. The variety of views regarding gossip's purpose and the biases society have against it, together with the vulnerability of some people to gossip more than others, have sparked a lot of interest. While others suggest that gossip is essentially a violation of the right to privacy (Blumberg, 1972), others posit that it is far from such. It was also discovered that the more socially distant the source of the gossip is from the target, the less wounding the news becomes to the object of the gossip (Wert and Salovey, 2004). Additionally, it is observed that circumstance is an important ingredient to brew gossip. The setting has to be just right, and the conditions have to be conducive for gossip to thrive (Abrahams, 1970). Yerkovich (1977) and Spacks (1982) cited the congeniality of the situation and a certain atmosphere of intimacy and gusto, respectively, make gossip even more recognizable.

Looking at a cultural perspective, gossip can be a means for us to learn about our social environment (Baumeister, et al., 2004). Either learning about other's misfortunes or hearing about other's accomplishments help people distinguish how he could possibly make a name to flourish in the social system. Cultural knowledge as a result of gossip thereby, enhances individual performance. As man strives for success, undeniably, one would compare one's success to that of others. Gossip is basically a function of social comparison. When one compares himself with others, it is driven not just by the need for self-evaluation, but the drive for improving or enhancing oneself (Wert and Salovey, 2004). Hearing about another person's accomplishments through the grapevine encourages one to try and reach the same achievements so he can say he is as successful.

People gossip because they need information. In the quest for filling the gap between knowing and not knowing, gossip can provide information that the formal network of communication cannot. Through gossip, information can be obtained in a more efficient and indirect way than personal experience (Levin and Arluke, 1987, as cited by Turcotte, 2012). People may also gossip because they need a pastime, a form of entertainment, or recreation. When they get bored, have got nothing else to do, or simply wish to escape reality and monotony, people often indulge in the guilty pleasure of gossiping. Gossip is fun, enjoyable, amusing, and pleasurable (Turcotte, 2012; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). On another note, people gossip to belong. Gossip brings together people who share common interests, and establishes a line between insiders (i.e. "us") and outsiders (i.e. "them"). People may also gossip because they want to feel that they are special in the organization, that they have "power" that may not be necessarily provided by the formal network. Kurland and Pelled (2010) developed a model of gossip and power, concluding that contrary to the popular perception that only "small" people tittle-tattle, gossip can actually make a person quite "large" in an organization. While the model showed the different relationships that come into play in both positive and negative gossip, it also recognized the dual nature of gossip as both beneficial and harmful

by showing conditions in which gossiping may boomerang on the gossiper. As Foster (2004) posits, gossip is a form of an internal police. Summing this up, we find that whatever reasons a person has in engaging in gossip, it is fueled by some or all of the social functions of gossip. Said social functions are: (1) information, (2) entertainment, (3) friendship or intimacy, and (4) influence. (Foster, 2004).

Gossip is also a subject of peculiar interest in the organizational workplace. Hafen (2004) fascinatingly presented what she believed to be the “gossip-information revolving door”, suggesting that a piece of news can be converted to either gossip or information depending on the organization’s perception of the political pressure that the gossip/information brings. It was posited that when management chooses to convert gossip into information, it is because it is viewed as beneficial to the organization. In this case, the conveyor of the news is seen as exhibiting an “organizational citizenship behavior”; meaning that the transmission of the gossip/information is with the intention of benefitting the organization. On the other hand, the transporter of a piece of news may be viewed as demonstrating a workplace deviant behavior. That is, the transmission of the gossip is seen as harmful to the organization. In this case, management normally chooses to label and convert the information as gossip. This “revolving door” can be a peephole into how an organization and its management can choose to view gossip. Admittedly, gossip’s two pronged role can either be beneficial or harmful to any organization. This is probably why no workplace is ever completely rid of gossip. The conversion of gossip into information legitimizes it. If this occurs consistently, it can signal that management accepts and tolerates gossiping in the workplace. On the other hand, frequent translation of information as gossip signifies that the organization does not put much value in gossiping.

Evident in most of the studies made about gossip is its concentration on evolutionary/origins, socio-cultural perspective and its underpinnings on human interactions. Emphasis on its array of definitions has already been given light from different authors. Reviews have been made on the phenomenon’s content, forms and functions. However, Psychology has overlooked the proclivities to gossip. To a great extent, human behavior may be attributed to, and from the upshots of gossiping, we learn, behave and communicate from and with, gossip. Even though it has been assumed that people use gossip in formulating his views of the world, an in-depth exploration on gossip can still be made possible from a psychological viewpoint. The theory we formulate aims to explain, describe and predict the nature of gossip as projection of basic life issues. Gossip undeniably gives thrill and excitement. However, we are usually unaware that our gossips are reflections of the “ghosts” (insecurities, inferiorities and superiorities) we have in life. Strengthening the theory may lead to other fascinating discoveries of the phenomenon in context.

Despite the stigma society has bestowed upon gossip, it continues to flourish. With the advent of technology, gossip is no longer confined to the hushed conversations by the water cooler or the knowing whispers behind closed doors. The seemingly effortless give and take of information as made possible by technological progress has contributed to the ubiquity of gossip. Given the unrelenting presence of gossip throughout time, geographical location, age, culture, and social structure, this paper will contribute to knowledge by examining gossip from a psychological standpoint, looking into man’s neurotic needs and complexes. Gossip has been considered as an understudied phenomenon in the field of psychological research. As such, this paper gives another perspective into how gossip can be viewed, examined, and understood.

## THEORY FORMULATION

This section is devoted to the formulation of a theory about gossip. A minimal set of self-evident truths are gathered from existing studies and are used to generate the core theory for this study. Gossip has been defined differently by different authors. In this paper, we will adopt the definition by Foster (2004) of gossip as the exchange of personal information about an absent third party that is conveyed in an evaluative manner.

**Axiom 1:** People build their worth by their self-concept.

The “self” is composed of concepts unique to the individual which embodies the ultimate question of “Who Am I?”. A person’s self-concept is shaped by the reactions that he or she receives from significant others during social interaction. One of the components of self-concept is known as self-worth or self-esteem. This is how an individual perceives himself, or what he thinks about himself. Another component is self-image. This is important for good psychological health and is an effect of how a person thinks, feels, and behaves in the world. The third and final component is the ideal self. This is a reflection of who an individual would like to be. It is dynamic, and consists of goals and ambitions in life.

According to Rogers (1959), the closer the self-image is to our ideal self, the more congruent we are and the higher is the sense of self-worth. Having a distorted self-image therefore brings about incongruence to the person’s total being. Self-concept highlights man’s drive--- striving for superiority (Adler, 1964). The striving for superiority arises because as human beings we feel inferior. At the beginning of life, we are born incomplete and incompetent which activates the feelings of inferiority. These feelings become the motivating force that leads man to growth. A man who has built a stronger sense of self-worth seeks success for all humanity, while one who has not becomes crippled with his inferiorities/selfish intentions.

**Axiom 2:** Man is in constant struggle to cope with anxieties.

Self-protective mechanisms that address the need to cope against anxieties become a permanent part of one’s personality. Horney (1945) saw anxiety not as inevitable but rather as a result of social forces. As human beings, our essential challenge is to be able to effectively relate with others. However, when a person views the intensive and compulsive pursuit of his satisfaction as the only way to resolve his basic anxiety, these needs become neurotic. Horney identified ten different neurotic needs which lead to three types of coping strategies. The first neurotic trend, compliant personality (moving toward), comprise of those who are needy or clingy, seeks for approval, affirmation, acceptance and love from others. The second neurotic trend, aggressive personality (moving against) are characterized as difficult, domineering and unkind, display hostility and has the need to control other people. The third neurotic trend, detached personality (moving away) are those who are labeled as indifferent, cold, aloof and displays antisocial behavior or those with no remorse.

**Axiom 3:** Man is a social being.

Man is by nature a social animal. With this nature, man will have the ultimate desire to be accurate, making it inevitable not to compare himself with others. People constantly engage in social comparisons. To interpret whether our performances represent success or failure, we often compare ourselves that to the performance of others. We are also most likely to compare ourselves with others who are similar to us (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison is deemed crucial to self-esteem because the feelings of competence or worth depend on a large part with whom we are compared, both by ourselves and by others.

**Axiom 4:** The structure of the gossip episode includes support.

Eder (1991) posits that the life of a particular gossip is dependent on the support it gets from the people it is shared with. It is not so much as the content, valence, or even the intensity of the information being spread but rather on the response it gets from the group that determine whether it continues to be shared. In the same study, an analysis of the structure of gossip showed that the first response to an initial evaluation in gossip strongly influences succeeding responses. Similarly, responses made even by peripheral or ornamental members can have significant influence on the course of the gossip. This means that response is essential for gossip to flow. In Eder’s (1991) basic structure of a gossip episode, one can view that after the identification and the evaluation of the target, a “response” is needed. Such responses can take a number of different forms such as explanation, support, expansion, exaggerated affect, and challenge. It must be noted that the mere act of responding already signifies social support. Thus, the life of gossip is hooked to the social support it gets.

**Axiom 5:** Relationship ties affect the propensity to gossip.

The findings of Grosser et al (2010) indicate that, in the organizational workplace, positive gossip flows among both expressive friendship ties and required instrumental workflow ties. Simply put, personnel do not need to consider themselves “friends” to indulge in positive gossip. The same study found that negative gossip only flows among expressive friendship ties. This suggests that a person only shares negative gossip to someone he trusts, and that the said trust is not necessary in the sharing of positive gossip(Grosser et al, 2010). Finally, the study also concluded that the more socially embedded (i.e. the more common friends he shares with a coworker) a person is in the organization, the more likely he is to spread negative gossip.

## THE THEORY

The nature of gossip is a projection of the gossiper’s life issues which are basically grounded on his overall self-concept and reflected in his anxieties. The poorer the self-concept is, the higher the level of complexes (i.e. inferiority and superiority). The higher the level of complexes, the more anxious a person becomes. In addition, gossip runs on social support. Without social support, the transfer of information is halted and the gossip ends. Thus, man’s inability to cope with his anxiety levels and compensate for life’s needs and demands, together with the social support received by gossip, increases the propensity to gossip.

## CONCLUSION

Every person deals with anxieties. These anxieties are normal in an everyday transitory sense. However, when a person becomes fixated on the pursuit of his satisfaction as the only way to resolve his basic anxiety, his “basic anxiety” turns into a neurosis. The neurotic trends identified by Horney (1945) all point to one or all of the purposes of gossip and thus, indicate that a person’s propensity to gossip is grounded on his anxieties. The compliant personality is the gossiper who gossips for acceptance, affirmation and love. This gossip purpose focuses on friendship/intimacy, and entertainment. The aggressive personality is the individual who is often described as domineering, difficult, and unkind. This is the gossiper who gossips for information, power and influence. Gossipers under the aggressive personality trend have more tendencies to gossip manipulatively and maliciously. The detached personality is the one who is inclined to gossip for information. Owing to his being aloof, cold, and indifferent, there is a wider gap between what he knows in the social structure he belongs in and what he does not know; thus, he is predisposed to gossip in order to acquire information. A person’s anxieties and neurosis is a reflection of his self-concept. The incongruity between a person’s self-image and ideal-self yields a mismatch that normally leads to poor self-concept.

Because man is a social being, and gossip is a social activity, everyone, then, has a propensity to gossip. Gossip is inevitable, but what makes gossip thrive is not merely the social nature of man. Rather, it is on the social support that gossip gets from the group or network that it is shared with. To refuse to respond to gossip and effectively denying it of social support is the surest way to stop gossip in its tracks. While the “soul” of gossip is in a person’s self-concept, its “heart” is in the social support it gets.

## REFERENCES

- Abrams, R. D. (1970). A performance-centered approach to gossip. *Man*, 5, 290–301.
- Adler, A. (1964), Superiority and social interest: a collection of later writings. H. L. Ansbacher R. R. Ansbacher (Eds.), Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press
- Ayim, M. (1994). Knowledge through the grapevine: Gossip as inquiry. In R.F Goodman & A. Ben-Ze‘ev (Eds.), *Good Gossip* (pp. 85-99). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.
- Baumeister, R.F., Zhang, L., & Vohs, K.D. (2004). Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 111-121.

- Ben-Ze'ev, A. (1994). The vindication of gossip. In R.F Goodman & A. Ben-Ze'ev (Eds.), *Good Gossip* (pp. 11-24). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.
- Blumberg, H. H. (1972). Communication of interpersonal evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 23, 157–162.
- Dunbar, R. I. M., Marriott, A., & Duncan, N. D. C. (1997). Human conversational behavior. *Human Nature*, 8, 231–246.
- Eder, D. & Enke, J.L. (1991). The Structure of Gossip: Opportunities and Constraints on Collective Expression among Adolescents(pp.494-508) American Psychological Association
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117-140.
- Foster, E. K. (2004). Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 78-99.
- Gottman, J., & Mettetal, G. (1986). Speculations about social and affective development: Friendship and acquaintanceship through adolescence. In J. Gottman & J. Parker (Eds.), *Conversations of friends: Speculations on affective development* (pp. 192-237.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grosser, T. J., Lopez-Kidwell, V., & Labianca, G. (2010). A social network of positive and negative gossip in organizational life. *Group & Organization Management*, 35(2), 177-212.
- Hafen, S. (2004). ORGANIZATIONAL GOSSIP: A revolving door of regulation and resistance. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 69(3), 223-240.
- Hallett, T., Harger, B., & Eder, D. (2009). Gossip at work: Unsanctioned evaluative talk in formal school meetings. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(5), 584.
- Horney, Karen.(1945) Our inner conflicts. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Kurland, N. B., & Pelled, L. H. (2000). Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of Management.the Academy of Management Review*, 25(2), 428-438.
- Leaper, C., & Holliday, H. (1995).Gossip in same gender and cross-gender friends' conversations. *Personal Relationships*, 2, 237–246.
- Levin, J., & Arluke, A. (1987). *Gossip: The Inside Scoop*. New York : Plenum Press.
- Machiavelli, N. (1995). *The prince and other political writings*. London: Everyman. (Original work published 1516)
- Mettetal, G. W. (1982). *The conversations of female friends at three ages: The importance of fantasy, gossip, and self-disclosure*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana.
- Rogers, Carl. (1959). A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships as Developed in the Client-centered Framework. In (ed.) S. Koch, *Psychology: A Study of a Science*. Vol. 3: *Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Rosnow, R.L. (2001). Rumor and gossip in interpersonal interaction and beyond: A social exchange perspective. In R. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships* (pp. 203-232). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rosnow, R. L., & Foster, E. K. (2005). Rumor and gossip research. *APA Online: Psychological Science Agenda*, 19(4).
- Spacks, P. M. (1982). In praise of gossip. *Hudson Review*, 35, 19–38.
- Turcotte, D. (2012). Gossip and the Group: A Self-Categorization Perspective.
- Wert, S. R., & Salovey, P. (2004). A social comparison account of gossip. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 122-137.
- Wilson, D. S., Wilczynski C., Wells A., and Weiser, L. (2000). Gossip and Other Aspects of Language as Group-Level Adaptations. In C. Heyes (Ed) *Cognition and Evolution*, (pp. 347-366). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Yerkovich, S. (1977).Gossip as a way of speaking. *Journal of Communication*, 26, 192–196.